

A Counterpoint for Catching a Tiger

Anton Vishio

William Paterson University, USA

The tiger-catching songs of the Minangkabau of western Sumatra must rank among the most haunting musics ever committed to disc; the combination of close, imitative counterpoint initiated by a shaman and then answered by the *saluang* pays deep respect to the tiger while insisting on the mysterious boundary separating the human and tiger domains. The counterpoint is remarkably fluid; while stable in its intervallic structure, via a framework described by Margaret Kartomi, the temporal structure of the imitation is quite variable, with many timbal and ornamental fluctuations from a basic model. The paper focuses on these fluctuations, exploring various ritual- and text-based motivations. Larger conclusions about the repertory of these songs are likely to be forever beyond our grasp, given the reluctance of practitioners to reveal higher levels of the songs to outsiders, not to mention the precarious state of the Sumatran tiger itself; instead, the paper must cast a wider net, exploring how the polyphony of the song is situated in the diversity of world polyphonies.